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## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE FOLK DANCE OF ASSAM

**Parikshit Nath, A Brief Introduction to the folk dance of Assam-Palarch's Journal Of  
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Unity in diversity has been one of the main features of India. In India, people belonging to different castes, sub-caste, tribes, people of different religions and languages live together. This speciality makes Indians different from all the countries of whole over the world. This country is also multi-coloured as well as multi-functional in the glance of social and cultural terms.

The state of Assam, situated in the north-eastern part of India, is perhaps the only state in the country to carry all these characteristics, where many castes, sub-caste, tribes, different religions, powers, beliefs, traditions, dialects, languages are visible. In spite of all these variations peace and brotherhood remains in this state. People of this place believe in harmony and goodwill. From a religious point of view, this state is also considered as a symbol of inclusion and association, an example of which we find the Powa Mecca of the Muslims, the Hayagriva Madhav temple of the Hindus and Gurudwara of the Sikhs are located in the Hajong region in the Kamrup village.

Assam state is a co-ordinated area of caste-tribes. Castes and tribes are divided into several groups. Cultures, strengths, beliefs, traditions and the folklore of all these castes-tribes are also different. Among the castes of this place Brahmins, Kayasthas and Yogis are the main. The tribes include Ahom, Bodo, Rabha, Tiwa, Karbi, Mishng, Tai, Tai Phake, Kuki, Moran, Matak, Dimasa, Sutia, Hajong, Tea Tribe, Khasi, Garo, etc are the mains. The Assamese culture is the rainbow of Assam which is formed by combining the multi-coloured traditions and beliefs of all these castes, tribes and religions.

Assam being the abode area of different caste-tribes, is seen here as an outward form of folk dance and classical dance. Among the classical dances here are the Sattriya Nritya, Bhortal Nritya, Ojapali Nritya, Mati Aakhora, Sutradhari Nritya, Rasa Nritya, Devdasi Nritya etc are the chief, on the other

side, Lok Nritya including Bihu, Bagurumba (Bodo tribe), Jhumur Nritya (Tea Tribe), Bohuwa Nritya (Sonowal Kachari), Bharigan Nritya (Rabha Tribe), Hachakekan Nritya (Mikir Tribe), Karlek Kikkan Nritya (Dimasa Karbi Tribe), Chomangkan Nritya (Karbi Tribe), Bartar Nritya (Tiwa Tribe), Gumrag (Mishing Tribe), Fatri Nritya (Dimasa Tribe), Kalichandi Nritya (Goalpariya Group), Jyon or Nritya (Tangasa Tribe). All these different dances are performed in different prospects and with different arrangements.

The Ojapali Nritya is a traditional folk dance of Assam. This dance has been practiced in Assam since ancient times. The original dance is born in the Indian musical tradition. In the context of the rise and development of this dance, there is a trend of different tribes in Assam. It is said that when Arjun was spending his life as Brihannala, he bought this art from the universe to the earth. Some people believe that a lady named Parijat learned this art in her dreams and gave knowledge of this art to her pupils. According to some scholars, Biyah Kala and Kendra Kala are both called as the 'Father of Ojapali'. The Ojapali Nritya has been practiced in Assam since ancient times. We found this in the writings named 'Smriti Ratnakar', Assam's tamra script, Guru Charit Katha of the eminent philosopher Vedacharyya of 13<sup>th</sup> century and also in Assam's different literature of Vaishnav Yuga.

The Ojapali was recognised and has been popular in ancient times before the great superintendent Srimanta Shankardev has been operating in Assam. Even Shankardev delivered his first preaching speech through Ojapali to the public. Later Shankardev embodied the Ojapali Nritya as the important part of Sattriya Nritya. Ojapali Nritya is one of the semi-dramatic dance forms of Assam. This dance is performed in a collective form. The interpretation of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana etc., stories are presented by this form of dance. In the performance of Ojapali dance, oja and pali both the characters are presented through the medium of both prose and poetry to the public in an interesting way. Ojapali is divided into two main parts - epic Ojapali and non-epic Ojapali. Under epic Ojapali - Vyas Ojapali, Panchali Ojapali, Dularee Ojapali, Nangwa Ojapali, Bhaira Ojapali, Durgavali Ojapali, Sattriya Ojapali, Damodari sessions Ojapali etc. and under non-epic Ojapali - Suknani Ojapali, Vishhaari Ojapali, Padmapuran anthem, maregan, jhunagitor Karigit, Tukuriya Ojapali, Rakhawal Ojapali, Aapi or Likiri Ojapali are amalgamated. In this, the character named Ojastartraga and then proceed with the help of the character named Pali. In Ojapali, Oja is the chief, who initiates the song and supports the Pali group. The Sattriya Ojapali, which is considered to be a central part of the Sattriya Nritya, is under the epic Ojapali. All the divisions of Ojapali are factual. In the present times, the Suknani Ojapali and the Ramayana or Sabhaghoya Ojapali have been living actively. In the Kamrup district of

Assam, the Oja who sings Ramayana songs is named as Sabhaghoya. On the other hand, who sing the popular prevalent Padmapuran in the Darrang district, is called Suknani Oja. Keeping the subject matter in mind, the song-verse theme of Ojapali, the epic virtues Ojapali is known as the Vaishnav art performance and the non-epic Ojapali is also known as Sakt art performance. In the epic Ojapali the verse of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the mythological songs are recited and in the non-epic Ojapali, Sakt Devi and Mansa Devi's are worshipped by reciting Padmapuran songs and also elaborating the story of chandon Sadagar and Beula-lakhindain various rhythms.

The word 'Ojapali' is made up of two different words namely, oja and pali. The word 'Oja' has come from Sanskrit word 'Priest' and the word 'Pali' is also prevalent in Assamese society, which means 'Assistant'. In the Ojapaliritya, the one who helps the Oja, who is in the song-verse, is called as Pali. They are of different types – Dyna pali, Gaurpali and Aagpali etc.

Ojapali Nritya consists of a white turban tied on the forehead of oja and pali, in which the turban is adjacent to the nav (boat). The anklet is tied in both the legs, wedged in the ears and wears white kurta to the feet a piece of cloth is tied in the waist in a special style. And in the body, wears white cloth (Seleng Chadar), holy dot of sandalwood is applied in the forehead. In both the hands of the pali, there is an instrument similar to a bowl. This type of Ojapali's are regarded as Vyasa or Vyaah Ojapali. Vyasa Ojapali is also named as Vaishnav Ojapali. In Vishnu puja and Basudev puja, Vyasa Ojapali are the only one to perform the songs and verse. Vyas Ojapali's song-verse is related to the Ramayana, the Mahabharata.

There is a special practice of rituals in the Ojapali dance songs. In the ojapali song, the use of special sound, rhythm, verse and hymns are seen. This dance begins with a special raga followed by Guru Vandana, Vishnupad, music and then Jhoona and Puwali song and Poovelli song. At the beginning of this dance, Ganapati with a special raga, blessings are received from Sadashiv, Mahamaya, Krishna and Gandharva. The use of special words is also seen in this ritual, such as ha-ra or Ganapati, ta-ra or Sadashiv na-ra or Mahamaya, ri-ra or Krishna, rita-ra or Gandharva. After this raga-vandana, the guru vandana is performed. The ojapali dance is the Gurumukhi tradition, due to which Guru Vandana is recited before the beginning of the dance. The recitation of the Guru vandana is sung in the Sindhura Ramgiri or Gunjari or Brahmari Raga, including the dance. Guru vandana is the beginning of a musical song, hence it is also called Patni Geet. Guru vandana is started with a verse –

“Shri Krishnaya Vasudevaya Devaki Nandanaya Cha|

Nanda Gop Kumaraya Govindaya Namah:|

" After this verse one can sing many vandana songs. Vandana songs- Sarang, Susarang Dashaag, Ramgiri, Dhanashree etc., raga can be sung in one or two ragas. The rhythm of this song is 'Lecharee' or 'Jikari'. A vandana song of jikaritaal is as follows –

“Ahe GovindaKi Dibo Yadav Rai|  
 OhBrahmandarBhitare Jat Vastu Aache  
 Samasta Tomate Paye||  
 Verse: Kiba Asan Dibo Narayan  
 Gaddure Jar Vaahan|  
 Kiba Alankar Ranjibo Tomare  
 Kaustabhe Jar Bhushan|.....  
 Krishnar Charan Hridaya Dhariya  
 Din Madhav Dase Gaye

In the material form 'Alap' (Raga), 'GuruVandana and 'Patni Geet', the collection of these three songs is called Gurumandali or Gayeed or Dhunni. Dance, costumes, conversations ornarrations,postures are the four main lead in the story of MudraOjapali. The characteristics of Indian classical and traditional style of dance is unique in the artistic dance.The charge of the energetic dance is observed in manystates of Assam.Sattriya Ojapali nritya is developed throughVyasa Ojapali nrityawhich was promoted by SrimantaShankardeve.

Of the 64 arts of life, the name of a syncretic form of Sahitya, Sangit and Nritya is Ojapali. In Assam Ojapali has been populartraditionally sincepre-shankari period. This dance is an invaluable and eruptive dance of Assam. It is not that thepeople belonging to same religionholds the Ojapali nritya,Persian Sheikh Ojabeing a Muslim dedicated his entire life for the Ojapali and Deudhani nritya. The name of thefirst lady to present the Ojapali nrityawas Hafiza Begum. Thus, all the people of Assam have contributed to keep the productive dance alive. In the end, it can be said that the Ojapali dance is not only in Assam, but is a unique and important folk dance of India. In this way, the Ojapali Nritya holds a special significance in Indian folk dance.

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